

Wine & Business

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ST. HELENA STAR

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Sean Scully photo

Andy Beckstoffer, left, and David Stoneberg headed up the table during a tasting of wines made from Beckstoffer's Vineyard Georges III. Winemakers attending the tasting included Jean Hoefliger from Alpha Omega Winery, Larry Fairchild from Fairchild Estate Wines, Eric Keating from Keating Wines, Craig Haserot from Sojourn Cellars and Mike Smith from his own label. Megan Loftus represented Adobe Road Winery at the event.

A taste of history

Wines from Beckstoffer's Vineyard Georges III

By Allen Bree
FOR THE STAR

In 1895, Grover Cleveland was President; the first professional American football game was played in Latrobe, Pa.; the first shipment of canned pineapple left Hawaii; Albert Nobel established the Nobel Prize — and Mrs. Thomas Rutherford harvested 100 tons of grapes from 60 acres of land that would eventually become Andy Beckstoffer's Vineyard Georges III.

Part of the nearly 12,000-acre Rancho Caymus land grant that was gifted to George Yount by General Vallejo in 1836, Yount subsequently gave 1,040 acres to his granddaughter when she married Thomas Rutherford in 1862. Eventually, the land came to be owned by the San Francisco Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, who, at the time, was one of the largest landholders in the Napa Valley.

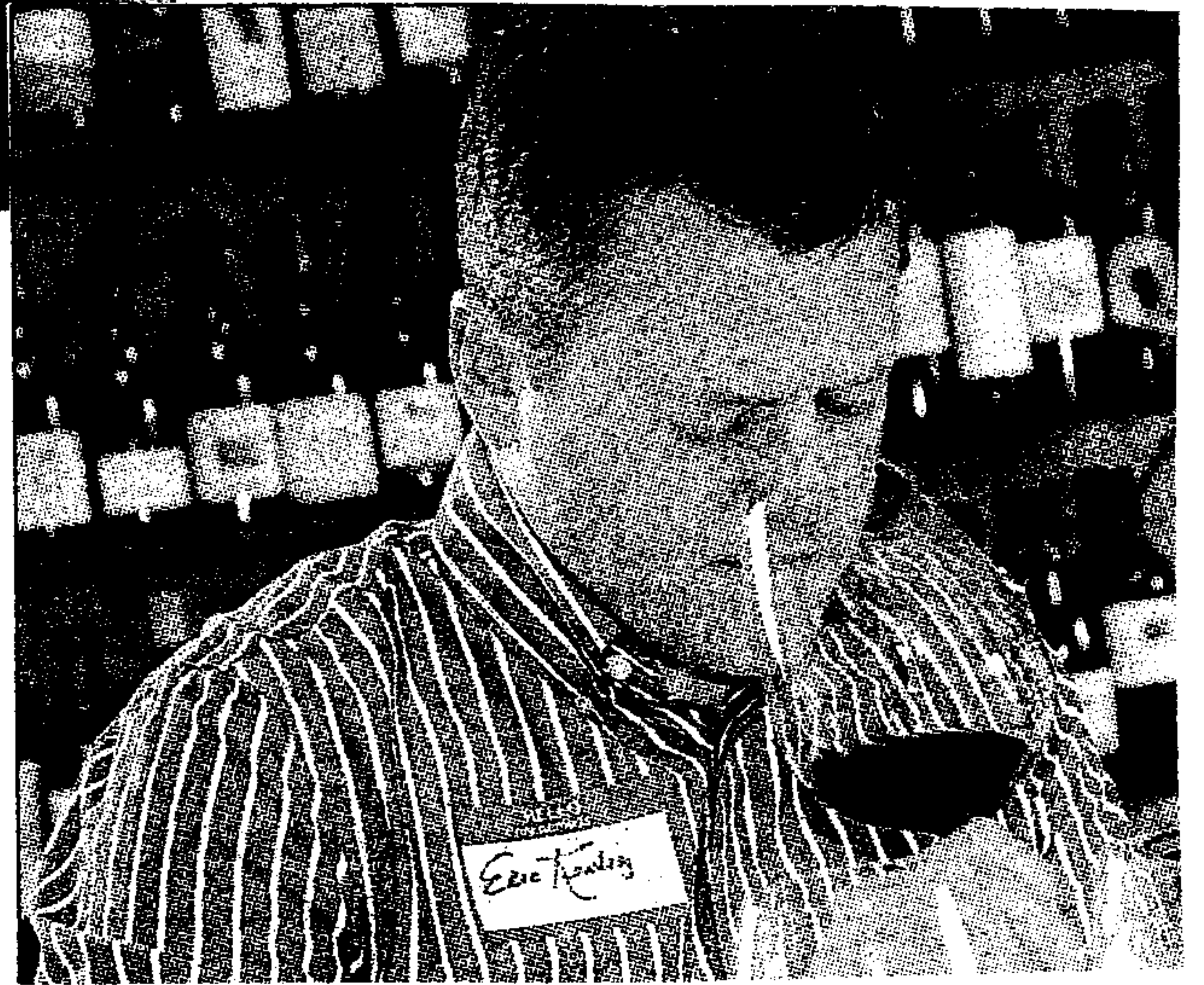


Jean Hoefliger, right, and Jeff Fontanella are busy tasting and writing notes on six wines made from Vineyard Georges III grapes. Hoefliger is the winemaker for Alpha Omega Winery, Fontanella makes wine for his own label.



The beautiful, dark inky red 2008 cabernets are best displayed in fine Riedel wineglasses.

Eric Keating evaluates a cabernet sauvignon during a recent tasting at St. Helena's 750 Wines.



With the advent of Prohibition, the diocese began to divest itself of vineyard land in the Napa Valley. In 1923, a young Frenchman began to purchase land incrementally from them — four separate purchases of contiguous land for a total of 198 acres.

His name was Georges deLatour.

The vineyard came to be known as Beaulieu Ranch #3 and would become the source of the Rutherford Cabernets of BV, crafted by the "Maestro" Andre Tchelistcheff. These wines would help secure Beaulieu's reputation in the '60s and '70s as producers of the finest in Napa Valley wines.

In 1971, a young man named Andy Beckstoffer began farming the land for BV. He became founding director of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers Association in 1975 and has gone on to become renowned for bringing modern science and progressive labor practices to viticulture. In 1976, he championed what was then a controversial move to use geographic and historical indicators to describe a wine's appellation of origin.

In the Nov. 19, 1987 issue of the Napa Valley Register, an article titled "Shocking idea from Grapegrowers" detailed the uproar surrounding Beckstoffer's (then radical) proposal that all wine produced in Napa County contain at least 75 percent of Napa County grapes. Beckstoffer purchased the Beaulieu Ranch #3 in 1988 and renamed it Vineyard Georges III. Additional purchases of

contiguous parcels brought the total acreage to 300. He has gone on to become a leading proponent of vineyard designated wines and was founding director of the Rutherford Dust Society in 1994. Recently, the bulk of this property and the entirety of the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard and the Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard were placed under a land conservation easement that forever prohibits non-agricultural development.

Beckstoffer Vineyards has grown to control more than 3,600 acres of vineyards in Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties. He was inducted into the Culinary Institute of America's Vintner's Hall of Fame in 2010, becoming the first grower to be so honored.

So it was with no small sense of history that I accepted an invitation to a comparative tasting of vineyard designated wines from Vineyard Georges III, graciously hosted by Monica and David Stevens at 750 Wines in St. Helena. Producers of the wines tasted and a few fortunate members of the press were in attendance, along with Beckstoffer and David Stoneberg, wine editor of the St. Helena Star.

The event began with introductions and a brief history of the property.

Andy Beckstoffer: "... So in the history of America, this property has only had four owners (George Yount, Thomas Rutherford and family, Georges deLatour & BV and Beckstoffer) ... I remember when we first bought the place

... Andre said 'Diversify by clones of cabernet — don't go planting merlot and franc and Mondeuse and all that other stuff. This is cabernet land. Plant clones of cabernet.' ... so today there are five clones of cabernet on the property ... all are planted to 03916 rootstock."

The assembled wines were poured in two flights of six wines: the first were all 2008 vintage; the second contained five 2009s and one barrel sample from 2010. They were tasted single blind and were ranked, but not scored.

The favorite from the first flight was the 2008 Myriad from owner/winemaker Mike Smith, while the favorite from the second flight was the 2009 Sojourn from proprietor Craig Haserot and winemaker Erich Bradley.

I must agree with several conclusions drawn by the assembled tasters: the vineyard does not produce "blockbuster" wines; the fruit profile is often red with black fruit highlights and for some, a hint of "loamy" influence. This taster found a common thread of elegance and balance in these wines, with the pedigree of this piece of land clearly expressed.

One cannot taste these wines without having a strong sense of the history of this special property. In a sense, we walked in the footsteps of the giants of Napa Valley wine history: George Yount, Thomas Rutherford, Georges deLatour and Andre Tchelistcheff. And there could be no finer steward of this, and his other Heritage Vineyards, than Andy Beckstoffer.

(Allan Bree is a wine journalist and photographer based in Napa. For nearly a decade, he was a principal writer for the "Gang of Pour," an award-winning website devoted to wine and food. He was also a contributing writer for "Swirl Wine News." He can be reached at Batonnage@att.net.)